Approved For Release 2000/06/13 : CIA-RDP75-00001R00010

NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE
18 APRIL 1971

The C.I.A. and the C

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WASHINGTON.

"I CAN tell when he walks in the door what sort of a day it's been," says his wife, Cynthia. "Some days he has on what I call his 'Oriental look'—totally inscrutible. I know better than to ask what's happened. He'll talk when he's ready, not before, but even when he talks he's terribly discreet."

The Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Richard Helms, apparently brings his problems home from the office like any other husband—at least to hear Cynthia Helms tell it. And these days Helms's job is definitely one of the most problem-ridden in Washington.

Successive budget cuts, balance of payments restrictions, bureaucratic rivalries and press disclosures that have hurt the C.I.A.'s public image have all reduced its operations considerably. President Nixon has recently ordered a fiscal and management investigation into the intelligence "community," a task which may take longer and prove more difficult than even Nixon suspects because of the capacity of the intelligence agencies to hide in the bureaucratic thickets. Both Nixon and his principal foreign affairs adviser, Henry Kissinger, are said to regard the community as a mixed blessing: intrinsically important to the United States but far too big and too prone to obscure differences of opinion—or, sometimes, no opinion—behind a screen of words.

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Considered a cold-blooded necessity in the Cold War days, the agency now seems to many students, liberal intellectuals and Congressmen, to be undemocratic, conspiratorial, sinister. The revelations in recent years that have made the agency suspect include its activities in Southeast Asia, the Congo, Guatemala, the Bay of Pigs; the U-2 flights; its secret funding through "front" foundations of the National Student Association plus private cultural, women's and lawyers' groups, and, finally, two years ago, the Green Berets affair.

The 58-year-old Helms knows all this, better than most. As the first career intelligence officer to reach the top since the C.I.A. was created in 1947, his goal has been to professionalize the agency and restore it to respectability. In fact, one of his chief preoccupations has been to erase the image of the Director as a man who moves in lavish mystery, jetting secretively around the world to make policy with prime ministers, generals and kings, and brushing aside, on the pretext of "security," the public's vague fears and Congress's probing questions. If Helms rules an "invisible empire," as the C.I.A. has sometimes been called, he is a very visible emperor.

While he tries to keep his lunches free for work, for example, he occasionally shows up at a restaurant with a friend for lunch: a light beer, a cold plate, one eye always on the clock. He prefers the Occidental, a tourist-frequented restaurant near the White House where, if he happens to be seen, there is likely to be less gossip than if he were observed entering a private home.

He likes the company of attractive women—young or old—and they find him a charming dinner partner and a good dancer.

"He's interesting—and interested in what you're saying," said Lydia Katzenbach, wife of the former Democratic Attorney General. "He's well-read and he doesn't try to substitute flirting for conversation, that old Princeton '43 routine that some of the columnists around town use."

Some of his critics complain that he is too close to the press—even though most agree that he uses it, with rare finesse, for his own and his agency's ends. Some dislike the frequent mention of Helms and his handsome wife in the gossip columns and society pages of the nation's capital.

Yet, if he gives the appearance of insouciance—he is witty, gregarious, friendly—the reserve is there, like a high-voltage electric barrier, just beneath the surface. Helms is a mass of apparent contradictions: inwardly self-disciplined and outwardly relaxed, absorbed in the essential yet fascinated by the trivial. A former foreign correspondent, he observes much and can recall precisely what few American husbands ever note in the first place—what gown each woman wore to a dinner and whose shoulder strap

Approved For Release 2000/06/13 : CIA-RDP75-00001R000100020057-3